



Gone Wild

STORIES FROM A LIFETIME OF WILDLIFE TRAVEL

MALCOLM SMITH

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Dedication

For my best mate who was with me on several of these excursions and who has put up with much inconvenience with hardly a grumble.

Introduction

I dislike travel. Considering the 30 stories in this book, that probably seems a very strange statement. Let me explain. The bit I do like is that more exciting aspect of the often tiring drudge of getting somewhere: arriving. And I particularly like arriving in the dark. There is something especially exciting about opening the curtains on a window that first morning – or gazing out from the door flap of a tent – and looking in awe at the vista that unfolds before your eyes. Providing there's a vista to be admired.

My most memorable experience of 'morning after arrival awe' was in Saudi Arabia. We had reached the Uruq Bani Ma'arid campsite on the western edge of the fabled Empty Quarter of the Saudi desert late in the evening. It was pitch black all around; it was a cloudy evening so even the usual, myriad points of starlight in the sky weren't illuminating the sands. There was no moon so it was impossible to visualise my surroundings. In the early morning when I stepped outside in the dazzling sunshine, I gasped in astonishment. The camp was virtually surrounded by huge orange-pink sand dunes, each one folded into the next and all of them wind-smoothed into voluptuous curves. It was one of the most stunning first morning sights I have ever witnessed.

I admit it's rather different if all you can see is high rise buildings. Surprisingly perhaps, even then there can be wildlife nearby. I recall waking up in a somewhat downmarket Mumbai hotel, the windows so dirty – on the outside – that I couldn't see the House Crows squawking incessantly in the street below. In Cape Town, my view of Table Mountain from the hotel window was almost completely obscured by office blocks; even so, Speckled Pigeons – their red eye patches like large blood stains – still visited the window ledges nearby.

My travelling experiences are far from worldwide; the places I have been to, the people I've met and the wildlife I've gone to see have often been dictated by commissions to write a feature for magazines, newspapers or for a book. But these have also been the trips producing the most interesting and unusual – sometimes even dangerous – experiences. Many of the people I've met, often experts on a

particular species – the Arabian Oryx, the Mediterranean’s Monk Seal or the Florida Manatee for instance – have been as central to these stories as experiencing the animal itself. Without those experts and other contacts I’ve met over the years, there would be far, far fewer stories for me to tell. People such as: Wade Harrell of the US Fish and Wildlife Service with whom I spent a morning watching a family of Whooping Cranes feeding in marshes on the Texas coast and discussing his hopes for this very rare bird’s future; my good friend Gabriel Sierra on the Spanish plains getting a close-up view of several male Great Bustards’ fantastic courtship display as they contorted themselves into shimmering white bundles, one of the most extravagant bits of pre-mating wooing to be found in nature; Thorvaldur Björnsson and his friends collecting eiderdown from the nests of the Eider duck on islands off the coast of Iceland; Miro Uljan, a local hunter and forester, with whom I hunkered down for a long evening in a hide in a Slovenian spruce forest to watch Brown Bears; or Wayne Hartley from the Florida-based Save the Manatee Club with whom I canoed along a spring-fed, warm water river while over a hundred of these gentle lumbering giants lolled on the riverbed below us.

Without such people, I could not have written many of the stories in this collection at all: a Kenyan Dorobo tribesman, Robert Lentaaya, who uses an incredible working partnership with small wild birds called honeyguides to lead him through forest and scrub to a wild bee nest so they can share the honeycomb the bird implores him to harvest; the Parsis in Mumbai, helping explain to me the rituals of their ancient faith and who invited me to a funeral where the bodies of their dead are laid for birds to consume on the so-called ‘towers of silence’; Stein Erik in Norway whose buoyant optimism at the start of an evening’s Elk search turned to dismay after four hours of finding nothing but a glimpse of a rapidly disappearing Elk bum; or Phil Newman, then with the Countryside Council for Wales, who led me swimming into coal-black sea caves among the cliffs of the impressive Pembrokeshire coast as he tried to complete an autumn count of the numbers of Grey Seal pups reared there.

All of them, and others, have been unfailingly helpful in giving me local information and explaining what they were attempting to achieve. François Arcangeli, then mayor of the little French Pyrenean commune of Arbas, dedicated to the reintroduction of Brown Bears in spite of enduring and numerous death threats, and having blood thrown at him for his troubles. Many others went the extra mile to give as much help as they possibly could: Dimitris Skianis, our ‘Mr Fixit’ – and sometime translator – on the Greek Island of Alonissos who arranged meetings with a variety of people who had rather strongly opposed views on the need to try and conserve rare Monk Seals in the Aegean waters.

Over the years, searching out some of the places and animals I needed to find to justify my trip hasn’t always been straightforward. Just occasionally, my excuse being

over-enthusiasm, it has got me into what might be described as some tight corners. Nevertheless, it has made the years of wildlife travel much more fun, at least in hindsight. The most disconcerting moment was being confronted in Oman by armed policemen kitted out in military fatigues, one of them the spit of Saddam Hussein in his forties; I was convinced I was going to be arrested. Another anxious few minutes involved getting behind a (really quite small) tree as a tonne of previously sedated Black Rhino, blundering to his feet having been given an antidote, had escape on his mind. And bluffing my way past one set of bureaucratic officials after another and signing forms I had no hope of understanding before being accompanied by a guard on to Southeast Asia's largest open refuse tip. Waking up in my tent in the black African night to the sound of small trees crashing near our campsite as a family of elephant came uncomfortably close. Being convinced of an impending crash into jagged rock outcrops as my gung-ho 4WD driver took a shortcut, hurtling us down a dangerously steep sand slope in the Saudi desert, so steep we were hanging forward in our seat belts. Or feeling a little vulnerable having been left (albeit temporarily) by my guide in Rajasthan, Satto Singh, amongst some thorny acacia scrub with python burrows and tracks in the sandy ground all around, not knowing whether one of these huge constrictors was likely to peep out near my feet.

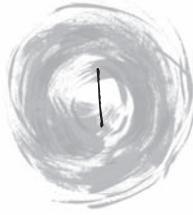
There have been several odd and amusing encounters too: the Tuareg tribesman in the middle of the Sahara, traditionally clad bar his rather ill-fitting and incongruous spectacles; the young Bedouin girl in Jordan, whose age I couldn't fathom, who broke off from singing as she herded her goats in the mountains above the archaeological wonders of Petra to sit next to me in amazement because I was watching some birds with my binoculars; or the young Moroccan lad who came running barefoot a kilometre or more through prickly scrub desert to accompany me watching yet another bird, then pick up a stone and hurl it with such accuracy it all but hit the subject I had been hoping to identify.

Some of these stories are about unusual locations and events, adventures in out-of-the-way places, and also the tribulations of trying to get even a brief glimpse of the very animal I had travelled to find: a chance meeting while completely lost in a canoe on a myriad of little waterways in Holland's Biesbosch National Park resulted in one of the closest views I've ever had of a European Beaver; or the couple of hours spent crouched in swirling damp clouds and cold drizzle on a knife-edge ridge in the rugged Madeiran mountains in complete darkness to hear just two ghostly – and rather faint – wailing calls from one of the rarest birds in the world as it flew in to its nesting burrow somewhere below us.

Several stories are about some of the most impressive landscapes and places I have ever seen: the dehesa of Spain's far west – Extremadura – those extensive, oak-dotted pasturelands that can stretch as far as the eye can see and which nurture a

cornucopia of wildlife from night-prowling Genets and Wild Cats to avuncular Black Storks and sail-pasts of huge Griffon and Black Vultures riding the sun-warmed thermals above; the alpine pastures of Schynige Platte, sitting amongst some regal, snow-white St Bruno's Lilies, listening to marmots whistling, and looking out to the ice and snow-carpeted Monch, Jungfrau and Eiger alpine peaks; or the Niger River through western Mali, spotting the occasional hippo basking in its warm waters, and watching a Bozo fisherman hand-throwing his net from a pirogue while Golden Bishops were rising and falling like giant bumblebees above the riverside marsh grass.

So here are some stories from a fair chunk of a lifetime of wildlife travel. I hope you enjoy them.



Arresting Moments

It seemed best not to make any sudden moves. And not to make a hurried attempt to try and hide my binoculars either. As the Omani police Jeep approached and I could see clearly its two occupants kitted out in their military-style fatigues, some pretty negative thoughts raced through my mind.

I didn't have my passport. Or any other identification. What if they didn't believe I had binoculars to look for birds? Did it sound a likely story anyway? What more sinister use could I have binoculars for? And, yet more pessimistically, what were conditions like in Omani prisons? Possibly not exactly luxurious, I thought. What's more, my wife in our hotel a little way along the coastal frontage of Muscat, Oman's capital, didn't know where I was. I had mentioned going to look for some birds but not where. And her previous concerns about my habit of getting up too close and personal with military installations, and insisting on going into places where entry was forbidden, suddenly seemed rather prophetic. My anxiety levels were rising.

I suppose most people assume that wildlife watching, watching birds in particular perhaps, is a pretty leisurely business. Hours spent whiling away the time in a hide overlooking a shallow lake liberally endowed with various herons, egrets and other wading birds. Or going for fair weather walks in forests, stopping frequently to listen to some twittering high up in the canopy (and swearing when you can't even see their origin). And any serious wildlife watcher these days carries so much magnification equipment in the form of telescopes and binoculars, it's no longer necessary to employ SAS-like skills of blending in with your surroundings in order to get close to your subject.

Unfortunately, it's not always quite so leisurely. And finding locations where you are likely to spot certain animals can involve venturing into some tricky spots. So it is that military bases and training areas can be something of an occupational attraction if you are interested in wildlife. Why? Because land used for military training, or sealed off for some other purpose, is at least not ploughed up every year and used

intensively for growing farm crops or rearing livestock. In the developed parts of the world most land is in some kind of agricultural use. Farmed crops are the last place you would want to look to see much wildlife. A field of peas, for instance, is good for Wood Pigeons (though less so for the farmer) but little else. A field of wheat liberally dosed with pesticides is good for nothing but wheat or barley. So, even though military training areas might in places be pockmarked by the end result of explosions or disturbed by soldiers running about firing guns, they're going to have more wildlife than modern intensive agriculture ever nurtures. If you want to look for wildlife, you most certainly wouldn't start in a field full of barley.

One incident where I got a little too close for comfort to armed soldiers was on the Aegean island of Lesbos where, at the time, the Greeks were using gunboats to patrol ostentatiously up and down the sea between it and the nearby Turkish coast a few kilometres to the east. Greek/Turkish relations were going through one of their more tense phases. In fact, things were distinctly tense. In 1987, the Turkish survey ship, *Sismik* was about to enter Greek waters and conduct a survey for oil reserves. The Greek Government gave orders to sink it if it did so. The Turks drew back but the incident nearly started a war between the two countries.

Come the following summer and our family holiday on Lesbos, I was occasionally on the lookout for birds. The Greek military, though, were on the lookout for Turks. Our two interests met where there was some very nice looking scrubby habitat. Nice for birds anyway. But it happened to be at what turned out to be a Greek military base.

Undeterred and ignoring the 'no entry' signs (I think they were only in Greek) and the helicopter landing pad we passed, I drove along a military road until stopped by a soldier with something like an AK47. He was coming towards our hire car. And the AK47 was aimed our way. Having spotted my binoculars – a dubious piece of equipment to hold at a military base in times of tension – as I scanned through the open car window for birds, the gun barrel was getting closer by the second and the soldier was now shouting, really quite loudly. In my limited experience, guns and shouting soldiers are never a good mix.

Recalling the last AK47 I had pointed at me – in the Saudi desert by an Arab companion who pretended to fire it assuming it wasn't loaded (it was though, happily, the safety switch was engaged) – a retreat seemed the best approach. '*Signomi, signomi!*' we shouted in poor Greek at the gun barrel and its soldier through the open window, hoping he understood that we were attempting to say 'sorry'. I turned the car around and drove away ... slowly. Why slowly? Because I assumed racing off would arouse his further suspicions that we were up to no good. And I feared a burst of AK47 fire from behind.

Getting into an argument doesn't usually help in these circumstances, as I learnt some years later in southern Spain. I had parked my hired car outside the high fence

of a military base; there was a large expanse of flower-rich pasture on the other side of the road but nowhere else to pull in. Almost immediately, armed soldiers arrived on the scene. Not AK47s this time but more traditional rifles. I was told to move; parking there was 'not possible'. I tried to persuade them that this was a good place to see birds. And that it 'was possible' to park there because I had already done so. Surprisingly, they weren't too interested in such semantics. So I showed them pictures in my bird identification book, especially pictures of Great Bustards, the world's heaviest flying birds to try and impress them. I said they might be in these very pastures on the roadside opposite their base. Not impressed in the slightest. Then I made precisely the wrong move. I stayed put and scanned the said open areas with binoculars. Looking for Great Bustards. An officer appeared and, in broken English, made it extremely clear that I would be arrested if I didn't drive away ... immediately. Bustards or no bustards, it wasn't the time to argue.

Arguing doesn't help either when confronted by police who are very obviously likely to fine you ... or worse. Even if they weren't intending to dream up some rather harsh penalty, they certainly will be if you start to argue with them. So I have learnt to do the opposite – I ingratiate myself. Usually it gets me away with a mere rebuke. In southern Morocco it wasn't quite so straightforward.

It was on a beautifully sunny, late autumn afternoon that I was driving back to a small town just south of Agadir where I was staying. I had spent the day on the south side of the Atlas Mountains. I knew it would be getting dark soon so I was hurrying along. If you have ever driven in Morocco you might understand why. Driving there in urban areas in daylight – when no one follows any traffic rules and you have to dodge donkey carts and mopeds travelling the wrong way – is bad enough. Doing the same in darkness with poor street lighting is more anxiety-provoking still.

So it was that I entered a speed-restricted stretch of road at maybe 10 km/h over the limit. Flagged down by uniformed traffic police with radar guns, I pulled in at the side. Mohammed was a young Moroccan policeman with excellent English. Complimenting him on his language skill, we got into a conversation about the university he had attended (the University of Fez apparently) and police college. It was all very amicable. 'But,' said Mohammed eventually with a look of feigned regret, 'I am sorry but I have to fine you for driving too fast.' 'Do you really? How much?' I asked. '300 Dirham [£20],' said Mohammed. So I counted out three 100 Dirham notes and passed them to him. 'Thank you,' said Mohammed very politely. Oddly, the notes didn't go into his pocket. 'Now I will return to you 200 Dirham,' he said in distinctly measured tones as he passed me two of the notes back, one at a time, 'So please, you have good meal tonight, a tagine maybe. And please no speeding.' With that I was on my way ... a little slower. And Mohammed had pocketed 100 Dirham. It was a better deal than 300.

All these events – military firmness, guns pointed in my direction and fines – passed rather rapidly through my mind as the Omani police Jeep drew closer.

I should not have been where I was. A couple of days earlier, I'd spotted a boarded-off area of land near the sea. It said 'no entry' but I'd peeped through a crack in the boards and there were trees and bushes in there. Trees and bushes usually mean birds. And trees and bushes are not abundant commodities in an arid country such as Oman. In there, I thought, I might find attractive little sunbirds with the fine, down-curved beaks they use to probe inside flowers to extract their nectar.

So, one day out for a walk on my own, I managed to move one of the large boards a little and squeezed inside the no-go zone. It turned out to be the site of former buildings and a garden being readied for redevelopment. There were scattered trees and bushes and I'd started to take a careful look at them. But no birds.

When the Jeep first appeared about 100 m away, I thought – rather over-optimistically – that if I just carried on looking up into the trees with binoculars, they might drive past and ignore me. No chance.

Instead, they continued to drive in my direction and stopped 20 m away. The policeman in the passenger seat got out first and walked towards me, arms akimbo, one hand on his (thankfully) holstered revolver. Tall and well built, dressed in camouflage fatigues, beret at a jaunty angle and sporting a large black moustache, he looked just like Saddam Hussein in his forties. Now I don't know about you, but an armed Saddam lookalike in military fatigues walking purposefully towards you when it's obvious you're somewhere you're not supposed to be – and carrying a pair of binoculars into the bargain – isn't likely to give you a feeling of calmness and serenity. It didn't.

A few seconds later, the police driver got out. A younger man (no moustache), he came my way too and, I thought, a tad more purposefully. Perhaps he needed to chalk up some arrests I thought. What should I do? Take the initiative and speak first or wait until I was spoken to, presumably, I assumed, rather harshly? I did the former and blurted out one of the few Arabic phrases I know.

'*As-salamu alaikum*,' I stuttered (the traditional Arab greeting meaning 'peace be with you'); it shows I can still be an optimist even at such times. Just. Immediately, the Saddam lookalike's grave and ominous appearance vanished. A smile broke out across his face. '*Wa alaikum as salaam*,' he replied ('And upon you be peace'). We shook hands. He introduced me to his driver. We shook hands too. He beamed as well. We all beamed big smiles. Smiles. Handshakes. I could have kissed them I was so relieved. Quickly I thought that a kiss probably wouldn't be the best idea I'd had for a while. The policeman who once looked like Saddam (even his moustache seemed less threatening and more friendly now) offered me a cigarette. I refused politely – which I instantly thought to be a bad move – but they both lit up and it didn't seem to matter

a jot that I didn't smoke. We laughed, though at what or why I'm not sure. For my part it was pure relief.

Then they broke into English. 'How do you like Oman? Are you staying long? Muscat is a fine city, yes? Where do you come from?' and maybe other touristy questions too. I lauded praises on everything I could think of. Everything and everywhere was wonderful I said (actually it was very good!). And it was most certainly very much better now!

I showed them my binoculars and pointed up in the trees, mumbled about birds (I still hadn't seen any) and they looked interested. In truth they either didn't understand what I was talking about or they were simply being polite. No mention was made of what I was doing in this fenced-off site or how I'd got in there in the first place. I was probably marked down as that well known foreign oddity – a Brit.

Oman has a history of good relations with the UK and here it was in spadeloads. I wish I'd remembered that when I first spotted the police Jeep. And then they were off. Friendly goodbyes. Another handshake all round. And yet more smiles. They waved from the Jeep as they turned and drove away. I stood there for a while breathing some very big sighs of relief. And looked again for a few birds.

I didn't find any.



A Zip Zoo Jar

Animals aren't capable of considering aesthetics. For all wild creatures, obtaining sufficient food trumps any other consideration. In what sort of location the food might be found is of zero consequence. Getting it is all that is important.

So refuse tips are very often attractive places for birds. Indeed, what could be better; a mix of human throwaway detritus that includes waste food and a plethora of insects that feed off it into the bargain. Not only do those birds that delight in eating dead meat – the carrion-eaters such as kites, eagles or crows – get a feed, but also so do some much smaller representatives of the avian world that make a meal of insects. Pretty little wagtails for instance. A scruffy refuse tip can be bird nirvana.

In Mali, I once watched flocks of huge Marabou Storks – as tall as a small person – gorging on some of the distinctly putrid contents of refuse dumps. The bird guidebooks show these storks as rather svelte; tall, grey-backed birds with red heads although they do possess a less than svelte, fleshy-red throat pouch that hangs down in front of their chests. In reality they look pretty ugly, dirty with dust and a few feathers missing courtesy of fights between birds to get the best refuse pickings. And that pouch looks rather like a lop-sided and grossly distended pair of testicles swinging from side to side as they move. I can't say that Marabous are the most attractive birds I've ever seen.

British refuse tips, a once familiar feature of our countryside and suburbs, are now rapidly, and thankfully, disappearing as we recycle more and more of our refuse or use it in other ways. But they were once a haven for gulls and other birds too. You could spot such a refuse tip from several kilometres away. There was always a characteristic white cloud of gulls in the air above it. And those gulls were clearly finding it easier to grab some rotting, tipped-out food than search under the seashore shingle for a few tough cockles and mussels that have to be tugged out of their shells before they can be consumed.

The problem for bird fanatics is that, except in much of Africa and the Middle East, most refuse tips are not open to the public or were long ago closed down. Those

still in use are often fenced off to keep people out and prying eyes at a distance. Not the safest of places to explore courtesy of disease-carrying rats or rabies-carrying feral dogs. Who would want to visit them? Who indeed?

And so it was that I found myself in Mumbai, the business and entertainment capital of India. I was there to research a feature for *The Telegraph Magazine* about the enormous and rapid decline of vultures in India (and its neighbouring countries) and how that was impacting on the Parsis who traditionally encouraged vultures to eat their dead. With its 14 million or so inhabitants and a reputed 5 million street dwellers who have no more than the clothes they stand up in – and sometimes pitifully few of those – this teeming city is in the top ten of the most populous in the world. If it's the street-food kiosks along Chowpatty Beach, the brassware at Chor Bazaar, or the history of the famous Taj hotel you're interested in, Mumbai has tour guides happy to help you negotiate this sardine can of a city. Even tours of Dharavi, one of the city's larger slums – the one made famous by Danny Boyle's 2008 film, *Slumdog Millionaire* – are increasingly popular. But there is one place in Mumbai that no tour company or guide will take you, one that is sealed off from prying foreign eyes – that is the putrid Deonar refuse tip, the city's main refuse dumping ground.

Mumbai's Deonar tip covers over 140 ha of land and is piled with stinking, decomposing garbage as high as a seven storey building. Each and every day it receives 5,500 tonnes of refuse, 600 tonnes of silt from the city's drains and 25 tonnes of medical waste. Between March and June the daily amount of silt dumped there rises to more than 9,000 tonnes because of drain cleaning in advance of the annual monsoon. Come the monsoon, horrendous pollution runs off it into streams that appear out of its rotting bowels. That water pours down the Thane Creek and out into the Arabian Sea, polluting its inshore waters. The largest open refuse tip in Asia, it has been in operation since 1927 when the British started dumping here on land that was then on the city's outskirts. But Mumbai has grown. Today, urban slums crowd up against the southern and western edges of this monstrous pile. Health problems blight the shanty communities around it.

I'd been talking to experts at the Bombay Natural History Society (BHNS), the RSPB's equivalent in India, and I had mentioned the Deonar tip. I knew that it once had thousands of vultures circling over it and pouncing down on to its scraps of food. But they had all died out. Or so the BHNS people believed. I thought I should check it out, and at least find out what birds had taken over from the once omnipresent vultures. The society gave me a driver and a vehicle for the morning to get there. They were not very optimistic about my chances of getting on to the tip itself but at least, they suggested, I could see where it was and have a squint at whatever birds might be in the air above it.